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The Borrowed Breast: A Representation of Wet Nurses in Victorian England

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In this paper, we examine certain representations of the Victorian wet nurse. Modern mothers, who can choose between maternal breastfeeding and a safe formula, may consider borrowing the breasts of wet nurses to be an extremely strange arrangement, far removed from their own experience. However, there may be a number of modern mothers who feel sorry when they cannot breastfeed their infants, or several working mothers who feel rather guilty when they leave their children at a daycare or with babysitters. Mothers who feel sorry or guilty share a child-rearing climate that is fairly similar to that of Victorian mothers. A thorough examination into the wet-nursing custom reveals that the experience of modern mothers is not considerably different from that of their Victorian counterparts.

As Mrs. Beeton noted, the Victorians generally considered wet nurses a nuisance. In middle-class homes, servants were always the cause of trouble and of these, wet nurses were the most difficult ones to handle: "there is no domestic theme . . . more fraught with vexation and disquietude than that ever-fruitful source of annoyance, 'the Nurse' " (473). These nurses were paid well because they exercised the power of life and death over their employers' children.¹ They virtually reigned over the nurseries in middle-class homes. On the other hand, wet nurses were occasionally feared to be a source of moral and physical pollution. Doctors too believed that not only certain diseases but moral characteristics as well were transmitted through breast milk.²

The attitude of Charles Dickens's *Dombey* toward his son's wet nurse is reflective of some of the fears of the time. The death of his wife at childbirth compels Dombey to hire a wet nurse for his longed-for heir. However, he so dreads contact with the lower class that he continues to reject every applicant until the last moment. Even after deciding on Polly Toodle, he attempts to separate her from her family background. First, he prohibits her from meeting her family. He even renames her, replacing her entire name with merely "Richards." By doing so, he hopes to erase her relationship with her family. His measures to cope with his fear concentrate on positing it as "a question of wages, altogether"(16). He attempts to regard his wet

nurse as a mere commodity rather than a human being with feelings and sentiments.

However, Dombey's cautious measures cannot prevent his wet nurse from displaying human feelings. In fact, Polly proves to be an ideal surrogate mother. She not only nurses a bereft child but also becomes an ideal mother-figure to that child's motherless sister who, by virtue of being a daughter, is unloved by her father. Later, she even returns to watch over devastated Dombey. Dombey's fear proves to be groundless and the wet nurse clears her name. Thus, Dickens initially depicted a wet nurse as an object of middle-class fear and later as an ideal surrogate mother.

Dickens's representation of a wet nurse, however, conceals an extremely grave problem concerning the transaction: the price paid by the child of a wet nurse. Since wet nurses in those days were expected to live in their employer's house, their babies were deprived of natural nourishment by their mothers and were subject to unsatisfactory and occasionally dangerous artificial feeding. Thus, they were easily pushed to the brink of death. In Dickens's novel, however, Polly's baby is properly nurtured for by Polly's sister, and Dickens never hints at the possibility of difficulty in the baby's survival. On the contrary, he emphasizes the happy and comical aspects of Polly's family. As Margaret Wiley argues, Dickens, who himself hired wet nurses, might have been reluctant to deal with this grave aspect of wet nursing (225).

However, it was not difficult for an employer to recognize the fact that on hiring a wet nurse, his or her baby would survive at the expense of the wet nurse's own child. For example, the four-time Prime Minister William Gladstone could not ignore the possible sacrifice that wet nursing demanded, and in 1842, he discontinued the services of the wet nurse who had been nursing his second child. Instead, he decided to handfeed the child with ass's milk (247). The fact that some employers preferred to hire a wet nurse who had lost her baby suggests that they desired to avoid any feeling of guilt that they might experience upon learning the possible death of their wet nurse's baby during her service in their homes.³

The high mortality rate of hand-fed infants and the price paid by the wet nurses' children were topics of debate in medical journals of mid-Victorian England. In 1850, Dr. Webster called attention to the "large mortality from the want of breast-milk" (513). He stated its relation to the custom of wet nursing and accused mothers of upper and middle ranks who would not suckle their own infants for fashionable reasons.

This problem attracted particular attention when the employment of unmarried wet nurses was being debated. At a time when moral characteristics were believed

to be transmitted through human milk, unmarried wet nurses, who were considered unquestioningly immoral, were officially avoided. Nevertheless, single wet nurses existed in Victorian England. Classified advertisements in *The Times* include those posted by single women seeking the position of a wet nurse. For example, on April 4, 1861, a single woman advertised herself as a wet nurse along with married candidates: "WET NURSE. Single, age 21. Good breast of milk. Well recommended." Moreover, on January 4, 1871, an employer seeking a single wet nurse placed the following advertisement: "A WET NURSE (single) WANTED, for a young baby."

The existence of single wet nurses is evident from samples of advertisements in *The Times* (Table 1).⁴ Among 449 candidates, 138 stated that they were married, while 20 stated that they were single. As expected, the number of married wet nurses was larger than that of unmarried wet nurses. Under the prevailing moral atmosphere,

Table 1. Sample of advertisements by wet nurses in *The Times*, 1801-1896

Year	Number of advertisements (married / single / undeclared)
1801	—
1806	3 (0/0/3)
1811	4 (1/0/3)
1816	7 (1/0/6)
1821	14 (1/0/13)
1826	8 (2/0/6)
1831	12 (7/0/5)
1836	17 (6/0/11)
1841	42 (10/0/32)
1846	31 (13/0/18)
1851	40 (19/1/20)
1856	99 (25/3/71)
1861	84 (29/8/47)
1866	40 (12/4/24)
1871	21 (4/2/15)
1876	11 (2/1/8)
1881	9 (4/1/4)
1886	6 (2/0/4)
1891	1 (0/0/1)
1896	—
Total	449 (138/20/291)

Note: Advertisements were counted on the first Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday of each month.

Source: *The Times*

unmarried mothers might have considered it indecent to declare that they had a baby out of marriage. However, 291 candidates held an undeclared marital status. Since married wet nurses were considered decent, these statistics could be interpreted as indicating that several unmarried candidates chose not to describe themselves as being single. Thus, it is reasonable to incorporate the number of advertisements by candidates with undeclared marital status into that of unmarried wet nurses. Consequently, we can infer that there existed a considerable number of unmarried wet nurses in Victorian England.

Thus, the heated debate over unmarried wet nurses in medical journals, such as the *Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*, in the late 1850s and 1860s was based on the presence of single nurses. As expected considering the prevailing moral atmosphere, most writers, in their works, opposed the employment of unmarried wet nurses despite some enthusiastic supporters who favored it. Among the doctors who opposed the employment of unmarried wet nurses and emphasized the fear of the transmission of moral qualities through breast milk, it is notable that M.A. Baines or "Mater," who is regarded as a prominent philanthropic activist of the time, put forward the destiny of wet nurses' babies as the reason for her opposition of the employment of unmarried wet nurses. "Mater" argued strongly against their employment by focusing on the forced sacrifice made by a wet nurse's child:

What becomes of the "poor girl's" child, which is put aside to make way for the interloper? — we are told not of its fate. Now its death is sometimes sudden, sometimes slow, but in any case it almost always falls a sacrifice to that tyrant custom, *wet-nursing*. (201)

However, as regards being deprived of their mothers, there is no difference between the babies of married and unmarried wet nurses. Every motherless baby left behind by a mother who works as a resident wet nurse is forced to live at the point of starvation. This depressing aspect of wet nursing led Gladstone to cancel hiring a wet nurse. The argument put forth by "Mater" was relevant to all wet nurses regardless of their marital status. She intentionally blurred the difference and opposed the employment of wet nurses altogether, irrespective of whether they were married or single. In fact, her aim is to lay the blame on middle-class mothers: "by the pursuit of fashionable pleasures . . . [they] render themselves unfit to perform that first and dearest duty to their babes" (201). "Mater" opposed the employment of single wet nurses not because they were single but because they spared middle-class mothers the troublesome act of nursing. She aspired to categorize middle-class mothers as

domestic ideology ordained.

The same ideology held true for those who supported the employment of unmarried wet nurses, albeit in a slightly different manner. Dr. William Acton, another philanthropist, was one of the chief promoters of the employment of unmarried wet nurses. According to him, most single mothers were unlucky serving maids who were seduced by a butler, a policeman, or their master's son. Therefore, employing a single mother as a wet nurse was a form of charity ("Unmarried Wet-Nurses" 175). He argued that if a single mother was hired as a wet nurse, she would be afforded the opportunity of useful employment as well as a chance to redeem herself instead of becoming a prostitute. Moreover, he believed this to be the only means of preventing a falling woman from becoming a fallen woman ("Child-Murder and Wet-Nursing" 183).

Unlike "Mater," Acton made a clear distinction between the unmarried wet nurse and her married counterpart. Endorsing the employment of the former, he staunchly opposed the employment of the latter. Employers usually sought married wet nurses on moral grounds and were embarrassed with the difficulty entailed by their employment. However, Acton considered it a right thing and praised working-class mothers who were not lured by the high pay that wet nursing provided.

[I]f they were . . . paragons of virtue and maternal rectitude, they are not to be got; and it speaks right well for English working mothers that they are not. Every accoucheur will bear me out in this, that no wages can procure married women of any pretence to respectability to raise one-half the children whose mothers cannot and will not. ("Unmarried Wet-Nurses" 175)

However, on the basis of his argument, we can readily infer that once a married woman took up the position of a wet nurse, she would be accused of doing so. Acton's appraisal of working-class women was based on the patriarchal notion that married mothers, regardless of their class, were obliged to stay home and raise their children themselves. If a woman is subject to patriarchy — that is, if she is under her husband's control — she should not leave the home over which her husband reigns. Conversely, if a woman is unmarried, she is not under the control of a husband and can be used as a commodity. Acton endorsed the employment of unmarried wet nurses as it was more consistent with patriarchy.

"Mater" and Acton, who ostensibly opposed each other on the issue of employment of single wet nurses, based their argument on the same domestic ideology. They

both supported the domestic ideology that women should stay home and devote themselves to the care of the house and family. Their argument centered on middle-class mothers and middle-class domestic ideology.

The economy of the borrowed breasts — the survival of wealthy babies at the expense of wet nurses' children — was graphically dramatized in George Moore's *Esther Waters* at the end of the 19th century. Esther, who has given birth to an illegitimate boy, secures a position as a live-in wet nurse. She unwillingly leaves her son in the care of Mrs. Spires, a childminder, who assumes charge of more children than she can properly care for. When Mrs. Spires informs Esther that her baby is unwell, Esther seeks permission from her employer, Mrs. Rivers, to visit her baby; however, the request is rejected. When Mrs. Rivers states that Esther's baby is merely a drag on her, she defends her child, criticizing the selfishness of the middle-class mother and revealing the true nature of wet nursing.

"Why couldn't you [nurse], ma'am? You look fairly strong and healthy. . . . It is a life for a life If you had made sacrifice of yourself in the beginning and nursed your own child such thoughts wouldn't have come to you. . . . [F]ine folks like you pays the money, and Mrs. Spires and her like gets rid of the poor little things." (150-51)

On hearing this, Mrs. Rivers is upset and threatens to terminate her services, but Esther leaves the house voluntarily deciding to go to the workhouse with her son.

Refusing to be an ideal surrogate mother like Dickens's Polly, Esther declares that she herself is the mother of a baby whose life is no less valuable than that of a middle-class child. Thus far, wet nurses had been almost voiceless. A newspaper advertisement was their only vehicle for self-expression, but those were too brief to reveal their real circumstances and feelings. Through Esther, the thoughts of a wet nurse were finally given utterance. Her triumphant declaration of motherhood and negation of nursing someone else's baby brought the economy of the borrowed breasts to an end and created a landmark in the wet-nursing discourse. Moreover, Esther exhibits the working-class mother's adoption of the middle-class ideal of motherhood. At the expense of losing a job, she decides to stay with her baby. This is precisely the situation that both "Mater" and Acton supported; they thought mothers should stay home and raise their children themselves, regardless of their class.

For modern working mothers, however, this ideal functions as a form of restraint: having inherited the Victorian middle-class ideal of motherhood, today's working mothers occasionally experience feelings of guilt at being unable to devote all their

time to raising their children themselves. On the other hand, full-time mothers are also not free from feelings of guilt. While they do not require the services of a wet nurse because they possess a safe formula with effective nipples and bottles, they feel disqualified as mothers when doctors profess that breastfeeding is the essence of motherhood. Indeed, to us, wet nursing is an obsolete custom. However, the ideology of middle-class motherhood, which formed the basis of the Victorian wet-nursing debate and was endorsed by the debate itself, still controls us.

Notes

[This article is based on a paper presented at the "Women, Health and Representation" Conference held in June 2004 at the University of New England, Portland, Maine.]

¹ As regards payment, in an advertisement in *The Times* on Oct. 7, 1851, a prospective employer offered a wet nurse 10s a week, and in another advertisement on Dec. 6, 1851, a nurse who does not suckle an infant was offered 4s.

² For example, in 1859, C. H. F. Routh observed: "... when a woman suckles a child she undoubtedly communicates to it the distillation . . . of the vital essences of her own blood; and thus it is that if a nurse of confirmed vicious and passionate habits suckles a child, that child is in danger of having its own morality tainted likewise" (580).

³ For example, in an advertisement in *The Times* on Nov. 2, 1841, an employer states "Any one having lost her own infant would be preferred."

⁴ Advertisements by wet nurses were counted on the first Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday of each month for every fifth year from 1801 to 1896, inclusively. The numbers in parentheses indicate the marital status of prospective wet nurses.

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